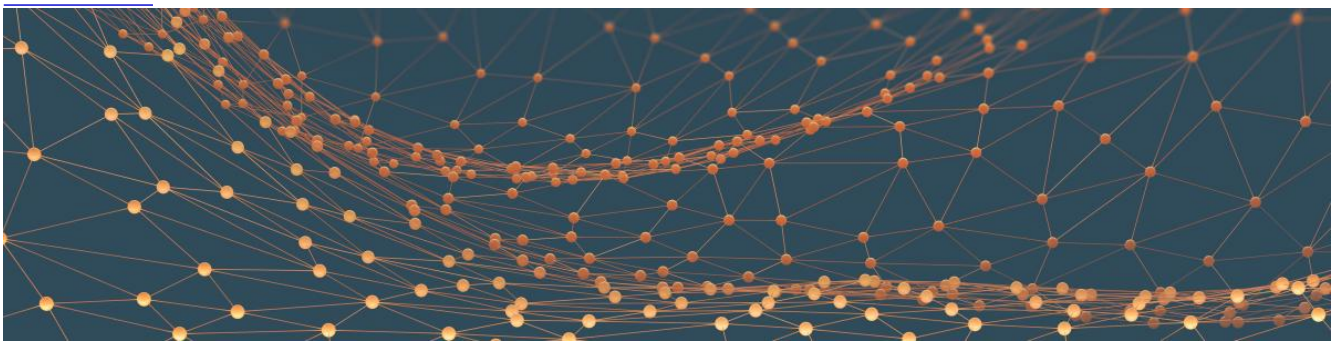
On Sinners and Systems: The Beruriah Principle

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Why do good people do bad things? It's a question that has inspired public curiosity—and therefore many books, studies, articles, and talks. In a religious context, it takes on added dimensions. If someone who identifies as a "religious" Jew egregiously violates the law, does it imply that their religiosity was somehow fraudulent? Ineffective? Or perhaps that their brand of Judaism is, at the root, fundamentally flawed. Although religion can be a force for disciplined behavior and moral heroism, it quite often seems to serve as an excuse for obviously immoral behavior. If Judaism is true, why does it not appear more efficacious in producing exemplary moral behavior—including from its rabbinic leaders?

For an initial framing of this broad issue, I've found it helpful to begin thinking through the lens of Beruriah's debate with her husband, Rabbi Meir:

There were these hooligans in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood who caused him a great deal of anguish. Rabbi Meir prayed for mercy upon them, that they should die. Rabbi Meir's wife, Beruriah, said to him, "What were you thinking?!" Is it is based on the scriptural verse, "Let sins (*hataim*) cease from the land?"[1] Is it written as "sinners" (*hot'im*)? "Sins" is written!"[2]

Rabbi Meir exhibits the common reaction of those victimized by criminal behavior. The perpetrators are evil, and therefore deserving of punishment. In this case, the particular crimes are not the focus, and therefore not even delineated explicitly. It is sufficient and salient to generically note that they caused Rabbi Meir "a great deal of anguish." His state of anguish is the proximate cause for his prayer to punish the offenders, in this case with death. We tend to presume the view of Rabbi Meir, that sinners are evil people deserving of punishment to atone for the harming of innocents.

Beruriah, though, sees beyond her husband's pain. She likely sees an inevitable but dangerous folly in praying for the harm of those who act badly; and she perceives different yet uncomfortably common roots underlying the sentiments of both the aggressors and the vengeful victim. More significantly, though, she sees the need to dissociate sinner from sin. Usually, this is quoted contextually as, "hate the sin, not the sinner." In this sense, it is an interpersonal moral teaching about the need to value even imperfect human beings; to hold out hope for repentance and repair; and to resist the tempting death

spiral of victimization–grudge bearing–ego-repairing superiority. But Beruriah's teaching also contains a coded message about the path to eradicate sin itself. It isn't merely a normative teaching that the destruction of sin, not sinners, is morally desirable, but rather a practical guide entitled "how to actually eradicate sin effectively," and it starts with dissociation.

When the focus is on evil people, analyses will yield explanations that focus on the flaws of individuals or the groups with whom they are associated. But this sort of analysis ignores a large field of sociological and psychological data that emphasizes the background conditions that promote sinful acts. For me, one of the hallmarks of a relevant Judaism is one that uses the insights of science, particularly psychology, to understand the motivations and behaviors of human beings. This helps ensure a degree of accuracy in a field prone to many theories and homilies. Truthfully, it's not mainly about being righteous or evil, but about the underlying communal conditions and pressures that will make sin more or less likely. All of us have moments of inspired altruism and moments of dark desire, to greater or lesser degrees. The relevant questions, then, from the perspective of communal policy, ought to be about the underlying factors that either promote or inhibit sinful acts. In this piece, I hope to introduce several relevant principles with broad application for inhibiting bad behavior in Jewish communities and leadership.

Psychological Compensation

The striving for significance, this sense of yearning, always points out to us that all psychological phenomena contain a movement that starts from a feeling of inferiority and reach upward. The theory . . . states that the stronger the feeling of inferiority, the higher the goal for personal power.[3]

Alfred Adler, famed psychologist, developed a theory of compensation rooted in his own experience of childhood illness. Having suffered from a variety of serious illnesses and accidents, he recognized his own desire to *compensate* by achieving power and dominion in other areas. A corollary suggests that, if a person has achieved particular excellence in a certain area, it might, consciously or subconsciously, allow for laxity in other areas.

This theory suggests areas for awareness and caution on at least two fronts in Jewish communal life. First, observant Jews often feel a certain sense of superiority, moral or otherwise, in relation to other Jews and other groups. Speaking personally, I can state that, although it was never a thought I set out to think, a life of observance did cause a general sense of superiority. For me, this was heightened when I chose to live a ritually observant life (I did not grow up formally observant) and even more so when I attended a yeshiva in Israel post-college. Looking back, I'm sure that the seclusion of a yeshiva environment played a role. And the honorable, proud feeling that I was doing something important, crafting a life of meaning and intentionality, rather than one of rote, certainly played a part. Legitimately, there can and should be a pride in practicing a beautiful religion that helps to transform the lives of individuals and the community. Hubris, though, is the very close cousin of pride, and looms ready to ruin the whole thing. In this sense, feelings of pride in Jewish observance can naturally and easily lead to a sense of superiority, which can lead to laxity in laws not perceived as important to the overall identity.

Although the Torah and prophets do clearly emphasize charity and justice, perhaps the most common trope, the current sociological emphasis of observant communities is clearly ritually-based. Shabbat, dietary laws, and to a lesser extent, laws of family purity determine to what extent one truly belongs to the group of "Orthodox," "observant," or "*frum*" Jews from a social perspective. Therefore, it is natural that there might be self-permission to violate rules that are less emphasized and carry less sociological weight. To change the dynamic, the community would have to educate seriously about business ethics and money in a similar manner as kashruth or Shabbat. In our communities, the finer details and debates about permitted foods engender more excitement and differentiation than the major rules regarding monetary ethics. You can see a person saying to him/herself, "You're a good person, you keep the Sabbath and holidays, provide for your family, and donate generously to the community, so it's perfectly reasonable to lie on this IRS form. No one will know, and besides, everyone probably

does it anyway. Why should you be worse off, especially when you use your money so righteously?" And the path to sin has been paved, not in evil character, but in psychological negotiation.

Second, theories of compensation have broad implications for those in positions of leadership. The truth is, our religious tradition needs inspired, authentic leaders at all levels. In our society, there is this common notion of "modesty," which suggests the shunning of leadership is praiseworthy. As Parker Palmer explains,

"Leadership" is a concept we often resist. It seems immodest, even self-aggrandizing, to think of ourselves as leaders. But if it is true that we are made for community, then leadership is everyone's vocation, and it can be an evasion to insist that it is not. When we live in the close-knit ecosystem called community, everyone follows and everyone leads.[4]

In a sense, there is an egotistic tendency in the knee-jerk modesty that shuns all honor and leadership. It isn't necessarily rooted in truthful assessment, and might be an expression of a need to remain small, to think of ourselves as modest… which ultimately feeds the ego. We draw strength from self-assessments that are harsh and critical, bit feel soothed and even aggrandized, paradoxically. As Hillel used to say, "In a place where there are no leaders, strive to be a leader."[5] Updated for a modern audience, it might read, "Acknowledge the urge not to lead and, with honesty, regular self-reflection, and the feedback of true friends, step actively into your role—we need you!"

More plainly, though, we often shun leadership because of the self-serving narcissism with which it is closely associated. "But modesty is only one reason we resist the idea of leadership; cynicism about our most visible leaders is another. In America, at least, our declining public life has bred too many self-serving leaders who seem lacking in ethics, compassion, and vision."[6] In this way, a dynamic is perpetuated whereby many able-souled individuals fail to campaign for positions of public leadership, while those who do often do so from a sense of narcissism and self-interest. Obviously, this is true in political life, but it is also true to a lesser but important degree in religious and communal life. Which begs the question, why do narcissists seek power in the first place?

The answer is intuitive and simple. Wounded egos of narcissists compensate with dreams of grandeur and power, the promotion of fame and celebrity, consumption, and an interpersonal black hole that strives only to be "bigger" and feed on more. Our institutions and religion become hijacked as part of this internal personal drama. Leadership positions are open, due to the general promotion of an egotistic kind of fake modesty, and narcissists quickly seize the empty seat, seeking to self-soothe and prove their importance. Institutions and even religion fail to respond to deep need, and become forces of competition rather than connection.

Those suffering from clinical narcissistic personality disorder, now in positions of leadership, often behave in a way that overtly ignores rules. Constructed compensatory narratives of self-importance quickly lead to the statement that "I don't need to follow the rules; rules are for other, lesser people." With Kantian ethics now rendered obsolete, it's no wonder that those in power might break boundaries and rules of all types in a desperate and doomed attempt to soothe their wounded souls. In order to protect against this, Jewish institutions must educate about the importance and necessity of leadership, and look out for those exhibiting signs of narcissistic personality disorders eager to grab the reigns.

Milgram and Stanford Prison Experiments

Confirming Beruriah's intuition, a series of experiments in the 1960s and 1970s produced shocking findings regarding the nature of social role and external pressure in promoting immoral behavior. Stanley Milgram conducted social psychology experiments at Yale University in 1961. His study, coming on the heels of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, sought to examine the validity of a defense that excused guilt because a person was obeying orders from a superior. "Could it be that Eichmann and his

million accomplices were just following orders?”[7]

This experiment contained three main actors, the person conducting the experiment, the teacher, and the learner. The learner was strapped to a chair hooked up to electrodes, and instructed to give mainly wrong answers to the questions asked. The teacher was instructed to shock the learner, increasingly, for each subsequent wrong answer in order to help them learn. The person conducting the experiment would nudge the teacher onward to shock the participant with increasing voltage when they hesitated or resisted.[8] All of the teachers, regardless of education or background, continued shocking the learner until the 300-volt level. A full 65 percent of participants reached a level of 450 volts, “killing” the tortured learners for the sake of a simple experiment. Milgram deduced that there are two different modes of acting, an “autonomous state” and an “agentic state.”[9] In the autonomous state, people work from a place of free choice and accept responsibility for actions; most people, though, will allow forceful authoritarians to direct their actions, passing off the responsibility for the result.

The Stanford prison experiments, conducted by Professor Philip Zombardo and funded by the U.S. Navy demonstrated similar results in 1971. Participants were assigned roles as either guards or prisoners in a mock prison, with Professor Zombardo serving as the prison’s superintendent. After just a short while, guards showed authoritarian tendencies, dehumanizing prisoners by giving them numbers rather than names, torturing prisoners with solitary confinement, and engaging in other forms of psychological and physical torture stemming only from an assigned experimental role.[10]

Given the reality that the vast majority of people will follow authoritarian leaders to kill and torture for no reason at all, how does this affect our community? For one, it should serve as an important counterbalance to the trend of enthusiastically following charismatic leaders. In modern times, this tendency has reached a fever pitch politically, but also within many denominations and subsections of the Jewish community. Leaders can, by dint of their own authority, often itself a product of the wounded-ego narcissism described above, shape the views and actions of the masses. We should focus, then, on building empowered communities, with leaders who seek to empower the community—not themselves. Instead of looking to leaders for the course of action, we might instead ask them to offer their reasoned opinions, to deliberate and consider other opinions, to engage in a talmudic style debate. What is needed is a healthier model that values the knowledge, sensitivity, and experience of talented leaders, while also setting up a culture that resists the known dangers of authoritarianism.

When I first took a pulpit position, a close mentor advised me to always take the time to explain the reason for any halakhic decision to a questioner or group, and invite any questions or critique. This has proven to be important advice. In this small way, the dynamic is shifted, and the questioner is forced to think, to engage, to accept agency. Similarly, rabbinic students of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik frequently recall how he ensured their own agency, giving his own advice, while maintaining their sense of responsibility over the decisions they would issue. A striking example is a beautifully worded letter from Rabbi Soloveitchik to Rabbi Yitz Greenberg sent in response to Rabbi Greenberg’s apology for not accepting one of the Rav’s positions. The Rav responded powerfully: “There is absolutely no need of apologies or explanations . . . I have never demanded conformity or compliance even from my children. I believe in freedom of opinion and freedom of action.”[11] Evil, then, is often actualized as a result not of poor character but of systems that erode agency and responsibility. We must build sustainable systems that foster and prize their growth.

Good Samaritan Study

In 1973, Professors John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson of Princeton University sought to study “highly ethical” behavior. This is a summary of their experiment and its results from their own words in the study’s abstract:

The influence of several situational and personality variables on helping behavior was examined in an emergency situation suggested by the parable of the Good Samaritan. People going between two buildings encountered a shabbily dressed person slumped by the side of the road. Subjects in a hurry to

reach their destination were more likely to pass by without stopping. Some subjects were going to give a short talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan, others on a nonhelping relevant topic; this made no significant difference in the likelihood of their giving the victim help. Religious personality variables did not predict whether an individual would help the victim or not . . . .[12]

They divided seminary students into two groups, those who would be giving a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan, and those who would be speaking on another topic. Then, they subdivided the two groups further, into low hurry, medium hurry, and high hurry groups. The hurried effect was created by making them travel a distance from the room where they were gathered to the location of their sermon, passing a “shabbily dressed” person in clear need on the way. Surprisingly, their religiosity did not matter much (it did affect the manner in which they helped if they chose to help), nor did the topic at hand. Even those speaking directly on the topic of helping outcast strangers were not more likely to help an outcast stranger on their own way! Rather, 63 percent, 45 percent, and 10 percent, respectively, chose to help, depending on the level of hurry.

It is no secret that we declare ourselves to be busier and busier. Often, when I ask people how they’re doing, they hurriedly respond, “Really busy, I’m fine, but it’s crazy right now.” I often find myself responding, almost habitually, in the very same way. Perhaps, it’s meant to signal that our own time is valuable. Or perhaps, it’s an honest reflection of how we’re generally feeling. It might also be a mark of pride, as if to say I’m not lazy and I’m working hard, I’m doing everything I’m supposed to do and more.

This is, in particular, a problem for leadership. As people are busier and less empowered religiously, they insist that clergy shoulder more of the roles classically performed by laity, including fundraising, marketing, programming, and charitable acts such as visiting the sick. Moreover, the declining cost of sending a letter (email is free and universally accessible) provides religious leaders, in particular, with a flood of correspondence. It’s not just correspondence from within the community, but from all over.

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner describes the issue well in his blog entry, “Why Do Rabbis Crash?”[13] First, he defends psychologist Roy Baumeister, a proponent of the Beruriah principle, against detractors. “In the comments on his piece, the author is taken to task by readers who think he is exonerating misbehaving rabbis. But I don't think he's finding criminals innocent; I think he is trying to identify a flaw in the system, which is making their crimes more likely.”[14] In addition to citing the problem of fatigue and its relation to impulse control (itself an important topic worthy of further discussion in this context), he notes the impossibility of the modern rabbinic schedule:

Now imagine a rabbi who is involved with congregants on many diverse levels—pastoral, administrative, ritual, social, organizational—for 90–100 hours per week, including Shabbat. And imagine that yes, he owns impulses for grossly inappropriate behaviour. But he doesn't have daily time to flee the situation and recharge. How long will it be before he yields to a grotesquely wrong impulse . . .

The uncomfortable reality, which I observed in my own synagogue rabbinate days, is that the job we have created for synagogue rabbis is impossible. Not "impossible" in the sense of "boy, that's hard." "Impossible" in the sense that there are not enough hours for them to do the job demanded of them, and recharge.[15]

He goes on to describe a moderate modern rabbinic weekly schedule, add up the hours, and list everything still not yet done.

If we want to preserve the possibility for ethical choices, we need to prevent fatigue, but also allow for the possibility of kindness. With an overbooked calendar, without sufficient time, a disposition of lovingkindness and the actions to actualize it are nearly impossible. According to Lurianic Kaballah,

God's first act was to withdraw and create space, *tzimztum*, for human action, but we've overbooked the void.

Communal policy recommendations readily suggest themselves. First, religious leaders must be given an ample amount of time to rest, through regular off-days, vacations, and sabbaticals, with effective and appropriate boundary safeguards (easier said than done) that make sure it actually happens. Time should be reframed, not as time-off, implying some kind of leisurely laziness, but rather as restoration, or empathy cultivation. Time spent on near infinite tasks (such as email) should be limited to a prescribed number of hours, and appointments limited too. Just as doctors often book appointments for weeks and months out, overbooked religious leaders should behave similarly. Not every situation demands immediate attention, and space must be preserved in the schedule if there is to be the possibility of kindness. The schedules of leadership must include unbooked time, allowing for the possibility that God's plans for our week might include the potential to look and help rather than to hide and shirk.

But it's also important to be honest. All of the professional safeguards and best practices in the world wouldn't be truly helpful without addressing the underlying issues of personality disorders and a lack of reflective self-awareness among the leadership. For those with narcissistic tendencies, the position becomes a perch from which power may be seized. Obsessive association with the wealthy *machers*, powerful players (Jewishly or otherwise), and famous individuals serve to validate the insecure clergy member, becoming the primary and at times obsessive task. Even for those without personality disorders, time studying Torah, engaged in heartfelt prayer, writing and reflection, and meditation, are simply too rare. And they are all activities that serve to advance humility and prioritize Judaism's core ideals in the mind of the leader.

I notice the internal fight in my own rabbinate very much, struggling at times to prioritize spiritual practice when financial or other organizational matters are (constantly) pressing, and think of the early Hassidic leaders and their spiritual inspiration to reorient and challenge myself. When I became the rabbi of a congregation, so many other rabbis told me I would never pray again in synagogue, as I'd be "on." Then and now, the premise should be absolutely rejected. At synagogues, one of the central functions is to provide meaningful Jewish prayer experiences, and leadership must participate, inspire, and lead by example. It is crucial to remember that synagogues and other institutions exist to serve peoples' spiritual and religious needs, and only inspired leaders who find ways to authentically engage with their own experience will have impact on congregants; people see right through power grabs and inauthentic experience. Practically speaking, it would seem vital for seminaries that train clergy to take two steps. First, to engage in basic mental health screening and assistance for the students admitted and ordained. Second, to teach and discuss with students the crucial importance of self-care, of maintaining empathy, of true humility, and of personal spiritual practice. Clergy often cross lines, but the root causes are systemic, broad, and build up gradually and insistently.

Conclusion

Beruriah's revolutionary insight was to notice the importance of detaching sinner from sin. This serves not only to protect against our judgment of or vengeance against the sinner, but rather to provide a way to actualize the proof-text from Psalms. Only when we resist the urge, ultimately rooted in our competitive desire to feel superior, to spend our energy blaming bad actors and instead recognize the systemic factors that produce bad behavior will we be able to abolish sin from the earth.

The concepts and factors introduced in this article represent a small fraction of the prominent causes for bad behavior. Under the right conditions, most people will behave with horrible cruelty, and leadership provides additional challenges, temptations, and pitfalls. It is therefore incumbent upon the community to engage in serious, evidence-based discussion and education, and institute policies and procedures that promote *Torah u'mitzvot*. Just as the Rabbis utilized a creative, emergent halakhic system to safeguard the commandments and promote their observance, we must continue the holy task in this time and place. As the Psalm concludes, "Praise—my soul—the Lord; Halleluyah!"[16] Examining the systems and external pressures that affect behavior can help reduce sin, allowing us to direct the energy of victimization toward God as a form of praise rather than pain, effective, honest,

and connected to God’s vision of an increasingly holy world.

[1] Psalms 104:35.
[2] BT *Berakhot* 10a.
[3] Adler, Afred. *Progess in Individual Psychology*. 1923.
[4] Palmer, Parker. *Let Your Life Speak*. Chapter 5 – Leading from Within. Reprinted at http://www.courageрenewal.org/parker/writings/leading-from-within/.
[5] *Mishna*. *Pirkei Avot* 2:1.
[6] *Supra* note 4.
[7] Milgram, Stanley. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. 1974.
[8] The four levels of exhortation were 1) Please continue. 2) The experiment requires that you continue. 3) It is absolutely essential that you continue. 4) You have no other choice but to continue.
[9] *Supra* note 7.
[10] *See* Zombardo, Philip. The Psychology of Evil – TED Talk. Available at https://www.ted.com/talks/philip_zimbardo_on_the_psychology_of_evil?language=en
[11] The original handwritten letter was published by Rabbi Dr. Zev Eleff on Twitter on July 12, 2018.
[12] Darley, J. M., and Batson, C.D., "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior." *Journal of Personality and Social Pyschology*, 1973, 27, 100–108.
[13] Torczyner, Rabbi Mordechai. “Why Do Rabbi’s Crash?” *The Rebbetzin’s Husband.* Available at http://rechovot.blogspot.com/2014/11/why-do-rabbis-crash.html. November 18, 2014.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] Psalms 104:35